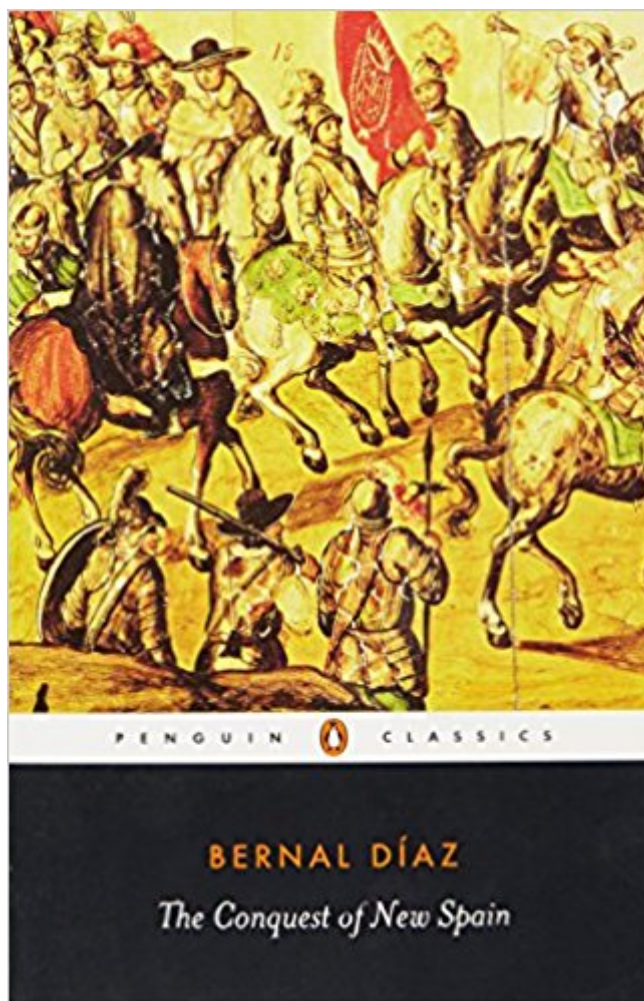


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The Conquest Of New Spain (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Vivid, powerful and absorbing, this is a first-person account of one of the most startling military episodes in history: the overthrow of Montezuma's doomed Aztec Empire by the ruthless Hernan Cortes and his band of adventurers. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, himself a soldier under Cortes, presents a fascinatingly detailed description of the Spanish landing in Mexico in 1520 and their amazement at the city, the exploitation of the natives for gold and other treasures, the expulsion and flight of the Spaniards, their regrouping and eventual capture of the Aztec capital. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

Spanish historian Bernal Diaz del Castillo (c.1492-1584) was a soldier in the army of the conquistador Cortes in the attack on the Aztecs. J M Cohen translated widely from French and Spanish, including for Penguin Classics Montaigne's Essays and Cervantes' Don Quixote.

I HATE HATE HATE HATE incomplete digital books. And this is one of them. LOVE the book

content, but it is incomplete. You never even get to Cortes march back into Mexico to subjugate the empire. So much for the "conquest" of New Spain. If you want the whole story, apparently you need to purchase the Memoirs of the Conquistador Bernal Diaz Del Castillo to get the rest of the story. Seriously kind of pissed about this.

This is a book only a Spaniard could write. It reads as if it were written by Inigo Montoya with its exaltations of the valor of both the Conquistadors, who (to paraphrase) for years hence would sleep in their armor because they knew no other life than that of a soldier, and the Aztecs, who (also paraphrasing) fought like a thousand Hector's in defense of Tenochtitlan. This book may take place in our world, but you will have trouble believing that because it is not our world as we know it. Nothing has ever transported me to another time and place so completely as The Conquest of New Spain -- and I've ridden in Doc Brown's Delorean. If you have ever read another historical account that had the same effect, then, dear reader, you MUST tell me about it.

Sometimes extraordinary events are fortuitously recorded by a well placed participant. In this case, Bernal Diaz del Castillo, describes the 16th century Spanish discovery and defeat of the Mexican empire in an account that is so compelling that it is difficult to put down. The basic facts are not disputed, and reveal the extraordinary military valour of Cortez and most of his men. He gives weight to existing tribal conflicts, the role of religious beliefs and also illustrates Cortez's manipulative cunning and great love of love of gold, even going as far as cheating his own men.

This Penguin edition of Bernal Diaz's account of Cortes's annihilation of the Aztec empire is certainly the one to read because, well, it's so readable, a page-turner in fact. This narrative of the common foot soldier has its inaccuracies, which are usually duly noted by the English translator J. M. Cohen, who does a splendid job here; but not so many inaccuracies as one would expect from someone writing of events that transpired nearly five decades in his past. In fact, it really is the only book I've ever read that has given me a "feel" of what it might be like to be a "conquistador" before anything was actually conquered: the horrible and wondrous sights, smells, peoples and customs encountered. The last chapter in which the Aztec city is captured is actually so fraught with setbacks for the Spaniards and the exhausting mire and gore of battle that - did one not know the importance of it in retrospect of the subsequent centuries - one might indeed dub this "conquest" a Pyrrhic victory for the Spaniards. It certainly still does seem so for Diaz at the conclusion of the

book. Indeed, the book is very exhausting to read in a certain sense. After turning through the pages of chapter after tantalising chapter, one becomes wearied with yet another fight, another death, dismemberment, human sacrifice, mountain of bones of sacrificial victims, that the book - while an excellent read and excellent history - has an overall disheartening effect, as if humans were only made to slaughter and sacrifice and make war with each other - for which, I grant, history in general makes an excellent argument. So, again, while the book is indisputably *sine qua non* for those interested in the downfall of the Aztecs, the images which live most vibrantly in my mind after reading it are the two great Aztec gods - Huichilobos and Tezcatlipoca - the gods of war and death, respectively.

Bernal Díaz's bloody tale is an extremely revealing text and an overt message to all soldiers all over the world. It explains how and why a handful of Spanish mercenaries went to the new continent and could conquer the Aztec empire and how those who survived the deadly onslaught were thoroughly deceived. The goal was gold. The only aim of Cortez's expedition was gold, not to christen the heathen or bring a message of peace. A Franciscan even brought bulls from the Pope offering dispensation for any sin committed during the fighting (He returned to Spain 'rich and well set up'). The hypocrisy of the peace message was blatantly revealed when the Aztec king was tortured in order to force him to reveal the place where his gold was hidden. Conquest. Cortez found allies (and thousands of helots) among the tribes which were ruled with an iron fist by the Aztecs through heavy taxation, regular claims for tribe members to be killed as human sacrifices, or pure rape. Tactically and technically (weaponry, civil engineering, cavalry) the Spaniards were by far superior to the Indians. Wooden arrows were no match for cannons, muskets, crossbows or metal swords. The Aztecs also believed the prophesy that they would be 'ruled by bearded men who would come from the direction of the sunrise.' Another factor was the regular outbreak of European bacterial diseases among the Indians (smallpox). The Aztec civilization. This extremely violent civilization was ruled by a despot (Montezuma). Dozens of human beings were sacrificed every day in order to slake the bloody thirst of their idols and to provide meat for the ruling elite (cannibalism): 'they strike open the chest with flint knives and hastily tear out the palpitating heart which they present to the idols. They cut off the arms, thighs and head, eating the arms and the thighs. The body of the sacrificed man is given to the beast of prey and poisonous snakes.' There was also gay prostitution ('boys dressed as women'). The cheaters and the cheated. Those who survived the onslaught, the maimed, the lame, the blind, the crippled, the burnt as well as the captains and healthy soldiers 'were all somewhat sad when (they) saw how little gold there was left and how poor

and mean (their) shares would be.' Many were still in debt. There was a strong suspicion that Cortez had hidden all the gold away. In the end, all the remaining gold fell to the King's officials. All foot folk was 'thoroughly deceived.' This book is a must read for all those interested in the real nature of man and the history of mankind. N.B. This book is only a part (about one half) of Bernal Díaz's 'History', which covers among other issues also the political intrigues around Cortez's expedition in motherland Spain.

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